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ABSTRACT

Although mothers have been entering the labor force in increasing numbers, little is known about the characteristics of those who hold varying attitudes toward maternal employment. A study was conducted to identify demographic predictors of attitudes toward working mothers. The Attitudes Toward Working Mothers Scale and a biographical questionnaire were administered to 96 male and 96 female college students. The results revealed that significantly more positive attitudes toward maternal employment were held by subjects with presently employed mothers, subjects whose mothers had worked longest, white subjects, less religious subjects, and subjects who had a child. Being Jewish and female also was marginally related to holding more positive attitudes. These findings suggest that certain demographic variables, including mother's employment history, are important predictors of college students' attitudes toward working mothers. (Author/NB)

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DEMOGRAPHIC PREDICTORS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKING MOTHERS

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Demographic Predictors of College Students' Attitudes Toward Working Mothers

Abstract

Little is known about the characteristics of those who hold varying attitudes toward maternal employment. To study this question, 96 female and 96 male college students were administered the Attitudes Toward Working Mothers Scale and a biographical questionnaire. Significantly more positive attitudes were held by: 1) those with presently employed mothers; 2) those whose mothers had worked longest; 3) whites; 4) less religious persons; and 5) those having a child. Being Jewish and female also was marginally related to holding more positive attitudes. The findings are related to previous research concerning correlates of attitudes towards women's roles in society.

Demographic Predictions of College Students'

Attitudes Toward Working Mothers

Statement of Problem

Women with children have been entering the labor force in ever-increasing numbers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Research indicates that under optimal conditions, nonmaternal care does not adversely affect children's development. Yet the popular belief appears to be that employed mothers are not good mothers (e.g., Etaugh, 1980). The need for research pertaining specifically to attitudes toward working mothers has led to the recent development of the Attitudes Toward Working Mothers Scale (AWM) (Tetenbaum, Lighter, & Travis, 1983). This scale does not simply measure more general constructs such as attitudes toward feminism or traditional female roles, as indicated by its low correlations with instruments designed to measure these broader construct (Tetenbaum et al., 1983).

While considerable research -- over 150 studies -- has examined demographic and personality characteristics of those who hold egalitarian or traditional attitudes toward women's roles (Etaugh, 1986), very little is known regarding demographic correlates of attitudes toward working mothers *per se*, largely because such attitudes rarely have been assessed systematically until recently. In a study of professional educators, Tetenbaum, Lighter, and Travis, (1981) reported that females had more positive attitudes toward employed mothers than did males. Marital status, child-bearing status and maternal employment history were unrelated to attitudes, however.

The present study expanded the search for demographic predictors of attitudes toward working mothers by administering the AWM and a

detailed biographical questionnaire to a fairly heterogeneous sample of college students.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 96 females and 96 males in lower division psychology courses at a private medium-sized Midwestern university. The sample included freshmen through seniors majoring in each of the colleges of the University, including business, communications and fine arts, education and health sciences, engineering, and liberal arts and sciences. The majority were 18-24 years old.

Procedure

Subjects completed the Attitudes Toward Working Mothers Scale (Tetenbaum et al., 1983), a 32-item Likert-type rating scale designed to assess attitudes toward the dual role of mother and worker, and the effects of the dual role on the woman and/or her family. Subjects also completed a 21-item questionnaire measuring the following demographic variables: gender, age, marital and child-bearing status, year in school, grade point average, religion, degree of religiosity, family income, size of hometown, employment status, mother's education, and several questions regarding mother's past and present employment status and activities.

Results and Discussion

A stepwise regression analysis was performed to determine the independent strength of each demographic predictor variable. Of the 21 potential predictors of attitudes toward working mothers, 5 entered the regression equation with a significant ($p < .05$) weight, producing a multiple correlation of .62 and accounting for 39 percent of the variance in attitude scores. Table 1 shows that the

significant predictors, in descending order, were mother's present employment status, race, religiosity, number of years mother has been employed, and child-bearing status. Two other predictors were marginally significant: religion (t = -1.80, p = .075) and gender (t = 1.72, p = .089).

Mother's present employment status was the most powerful predictor of attitudes toward working mothers. Those with presently employed mothers (74 percent of the sample) held more favorable attitudes than those with nonemployed mothers. Moreover, subjects whose mothers had been employed for more than ten years had more favorable attitudes than those whose mothers had been employed for fewer years. Previous research similarly has found maternal employment to correlate positively with more egalitarian attitudes toward women's roles (Etaugh, 1986). Tetenbaum et al., (1981), however, found that maternal employment history was unrelated to attitudes toward working mothers. These discrepant results may stem from the fact that the Tetenbaum et al subjects were considerably older than those in the present study. Maternal employment was less prevalent and was viewed more negatively during the years when the Tetenbaum et al subjects were growing up (Etaugh, 1980). Thus, having an employed mother may have been less likely to produce favorable attitudes toward working mothers among that older cohort than among the younger cohort of the present study.

Race and religiosity also predicted attitudes toward working mothers. More favorable attitudes were held by whites than by minorities, and by individuals who were relatively less religious. The marginally significant contribution of religion indicates that those of the Jewish faith expressed more positive attitudes than

Protestants or Catholics. Gender also was a marginal predictor. Females held more favorable views than males, in line with the results of Tetenbaum et al (1981). Previous research has documented similar relationships between the variables of race, religiosity, religion, and gender and attitudes toward women's roles in society (Etaugh, 1986).

Finally, those students who had a child endorsed more favorable attitudes toward working mothers than those who did not. One explanation for this finding is that those individuals (especially women) who are both parents and students are engaged in the same sort of nontraditional dual-role activities as are employed mothers, and hence they are more likely to be sympathetic toward the dual roles of the employed mother. Tetenbaum et al (1981), however, found that child-bearing status was unrelated to attitudes toward working mothers. Again, this discrepancy may be due to cohort differences or to other differences in sample characteristics.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that certain demographic variables, including mother's employment history, are important predictors of college students' attitudes toward working mothers. The failure of previous research to find these relationships within a different population suggests the need to study individuals from a broad range of backgrounds in order to clarify the conditions under which particular variables are associated with positive or negative attitudes toward working mothers.

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Table 1

Beta Weights and *t*-Values for Significant Predictor Variables

Variable	Beta Weight	t-Value
Mother employed	.39	4.44***
Race	.31	3.91***
Religiosity	-.28	-3.51***
Years mother employed	-.27	-3.34**
Children	.20	2.43*

* $p < .02$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$